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ABSTRACT

This paper contains the argument that the major focus of social learning must be on the development of people who value a variety of cultural and subcultural life styles. Four major concerns confront the classroom teacher or curriculum developer: (1) valuing cultural diversity in the classroom, (2) organizing curriculum processes to encourage the development of diverse talents, (3) creating materials and activities for actualizing those diverse cultural talents, and (4) initiating teacher-adult behavior patterns in the classroom that model the significance of accepting and appreciating cultural diversity for children. Several activities are described which foster appreciation of differences. (DP)

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TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT CULTURAL DIFFERENCES:

PROCESS, MATERIAL, ACTIVITY, AND BEHAVIOR

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1973 ACEI STUDY CONFERENCE
Wichita, Kansas

"If each individual is to enjoy the assets of his heritage then the problem is one of developing curriculum designs and classroom structures for releasing and utilizing the talents and experiential backgrounds of the culturally different."

Kevin Swick and Dormalee Lindberg
College Student Journal

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TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: PROCESS, MATERIAL, ACTIVITY, AND BEHAVIOR

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A major focus of social learning in this age of individualism must be on the development of people who value and cherish a variety of cultural and sub-cultural life styles. This concept of cultural pluralism encompasses more than racial tolerance, although that, indeed, is a part of it. It must extend beyond legal maneuvers to forge improved treatment of minorities although that, too, is a part of it. What's more, it must include an understanding and acceptance of new roles for women, children, and men. Indeed, the concept of cultural pluralism encompasses the more constructive aspects of actually valuing a community of people for each individual's unique and common contributions to life.

Yet in the process of developing a pluralistic citizenry, one must also provide a basis for people to rationally preserve - while changing - their continuity with the past as a framework for building a better future. A major thread weaving through American History is the continual evolvement of cultural diversity as a source of constant social renewal. Each new "cultural group" not only adds a new dimension to social life, but creates an environment where the populace must re-discover the value of diversity and unity as part and parcel of democratic living.

Once characterized as a melting pot, our nation is now in the process of assuming the role of preserving pot. No longer a fledgling in search of a common identity, we can now afford to recognize and value diversity within, diversity as a desirable characteristic, as an enriching attribute of our society. It then becomes our task, as educators, to assist children to understanding, accepting, and valuing those culturally different from themselves.

In this perspective four major concerns confront the classroom teacher, curriculum developer, and concerned professional or lay person; (1) valuing cultural diversity in the classroom, (2) organizing curriculum processes for encouraging the development of diverse talents in the classroom, (3) creating materials and activities for actualizing those diverse cultural talents, and (4) initiating teacher - adult behavior patterns in the classroom that model the significance of accepting and appreciating cultural diversity for children.

This paper examines all four components, giving an overview of the value of cultural diversity as the base for all curriculum development, presenting some ideas on curriculum processes for actualizing the cultural talents of

individual children, describing some activities and materials helpful in implementing culturally diverse instruction, and suggesting some teacher behaviors helpful in implementing a humane, diverse classroom environment.

Cultural Diversity as Curriculum Base. The myriad of cultural groups that gather within any classroom form a base (or should form a base) for life content and social learning. The diversity of talents, life styles, and value orientations of the children can provide the initiative and thrust for the development of improved attitudes and behaviors toward culturally different peoples. The different skills and talents of the children, if utilized as a source of content, can help children to visualize the unique contribution each person can make to life. Likewise, the various life styles in the classroom can assist in enabling children and teacher to study the language patterns, dress modes, eating habits, likes and dislikes, and a variety of other very important concerns that create the base for studying cultural diversity. In the same respect, the different values children hold and act out also provide the chance for studying cultural diversity. If approached very constructively and positively, the cultural skills, life styles, and values of the different children in the classroom can provide initial beginnings for studying cultural difference.

Curriculum Process for Studying Cultural Difference. In order to effectively implement a program of exploring the value of cultural diversity within a classroom setting it is necessary to organize certain curriculum processes to effectuate the opportunity to accomplish the task. Such arrangements as individualized study settings, peer group learning teams, small group discussion arrangements, team teaching approaches, and inter-grade level organizational patterns can stimulate and encourage the study of cultural differences. A rigid curriculum arrangement will stifle the desires and interests of the children in exploring cultural diversity within the school setting. These processes are mentioned because without flexible and individualized settings the following activities and materials will have little effect on the children in improving their attitudes toward culturally different people.

Materials and Activities for Teaching Cultural Difference. There are many materials and activities that can be utilized for teaching children about cultural difference. The following descriptions and examples are not exhaustive but suggestive for initial ways to begin such an instructional program. Notice that each activity is self-developmental and involving the children and teachers in exploring the life content of the cultural diversity within and out of the immediate classroom-school-community setting.

DAY IS DONE

Day Is Done is a classroom developed learning module that children put together to depict the ways in which people behaved and believed in different cultural and national settings. The activity involved the children in selecting pictures from different magazines which showed people in life contexts. The children discussed the pictures and reacted to the pictures via language experience activities. Later the children put the pictures to music, finding harmony in the musical movement that can be overlayed on all cultural styles.

THE CIRCLE GAME

Learning about the life cycle of man and other species can be most meaningful when the chidrenmare involved in the process of creating parts of the cycle. The Circle Game module was also developed and put together by young children. It is a record of their cycle of life during the school year. It is recorded on slides and placed to a musical score. Later it is related to the larger cycle of life and to the sub-cycles which man and other members of the species are a part of, providing a basis for interaction.

IT'S A SMALL WORLD

A primary grade activity for introducing children to diverse peoples who have common needs, unique interests, and distinct talents to share with their fellow man, this activitiy involves children in observing pictures of various people while listening to the record It's a Small World. Language experience activities and dramatic activities can be developed from this experience.

THE COMMON MAN

A concise little exercise in observing a booklet which depicts the common concerns of man, this activity also opens up avenues for the child to see the injustices and inequities of variant groups of people. Value clarification discussions and projects can evolve from this activity.

FAMILY TREES

The history of self is the take-off point for examining the history of other family trees. Indeed, children can discover so much about cultural differences by explaining their backgrounds and life styles of different families. Such an activity not only involves children in current pluralistic studies, but it helps them to gain a historical perspective on why people live the way they do and how various groups of people have developed family life styles.

STUDY KITS: CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Individual study kits which focus on the exploration of cultural differences among people are valuable in helping children gain personal insights into different sociological group styles as well as anthropological reasons for the ways in which different groups of people live. Kits may be developed that deal with the feelings of different pwople, self-concept development of different peoples, and information on procedures for developing inter-cultural and intra-cultural understandings.

BODY SPELLING

Providing a tactile, total involvement in spelling, as well as cooperative planning and acting, body spelling is both fun and an opportunity for group interaction. Small groups select words, then determine ways to spell them visually, using their bodies to form the individual letters in the word.

DISCOVERY ACTIVITIES

Use activities that children must work on from "out of the dark" - things you don't find answers to in a book. This encourages children to consult one another, and it doesn't give the verbal, intellectual child with excellent reading skills such an edge over the child who lacks such skills, thus leading to more cooperation in order to engage in problem-solving. Such things as mystery powders, mystery boxes, or mystery liquids might provide the vehicle to initiate discovery activities. Much interaction results when children cooperate to solve a mystery.

ME

An autobiography, written or drawn, perhaps cut-and-pasted, can prove to be a vehicle to self- and other-understanding. Children (and teacher) make books about themselves, sharing with one another what and who they are. Include a few pages for your friends to draw a picture of you, to list adjectives that describe you. Include a page for "all the good things about me," "all the things I can do," and "things I really dig!" Used early in the year, developed over a period of time, such books would show the change and growth of the individual throughout the school year, enable the teacher to learn much about students early in the year, and help the children to get acquainted soon.

US

A bulletin board about US - the class. It might begin with baby pictures, with pictures of us cut from catalogs, with pictures we draw. It could include stories and poems about and by us. The bulletin board becomes one big panorama of the class as they see themselves, and in the process each learns about the other.

KILL

This activity can lead to interesting discussions and value clarification, with an emphasis on the desirable facets of cooperation, the insecurity of suspicion. Small groups sit in circles on the floor. Each person draws a slip of paper. An X is on one slip of paper in each circle (approximately ten people). That person becomes the killer. Of course, only he knows he's the killer. He has as his objective the murder of each person in the circle. He kills with a wink. Other players become detectives and attempt to "catch" the murderer. When the killer winks at a person, they remain upright for a few seconds, then drop over "dead." When a player catches the killer winking at a player (not - himself - he'd be dead!), he may accuse the killer. If he is correct, the game ends. If he is incorrect, then he is "dead" and drops out of the game.

As you might expect, Kill makes the players feel very insecure. Your task is to catch the killer, yet if you're not careful, you'll be killed yourself. That's dangerous! Of course, the safest thing to do would be to just sit and look down at the floor -- only you and the killer would be left, eventually, and then you could accuse with safety. However, your task is to catch him and prevent further killings.

Ask children how they felt while playing. Did they trust the other people in the circle? From this recounting of emotions while playing the game, extrapolate to how it feels to be in any group when you're "different" or afraid, when you're threatened.

I'M HUNGRY

For this activity you need jelly beans, paper, and scarves of soft material. Place a number of jelly beans on two sheets of paper, each at opposite ends of the room. Use construction paper, or color a border around the paper if this is to be a group activity, since each pair of children will have to be able to identify their papers at each end of the room. Tie partners together loosely about the neck with soft material that won't bind. Tie in such a way that they cannot possible become choked in the activity. Partners may not speak to one another from this point on, and they must begin the activity from the center of the room. The objective is to eat all the jelly beans from their papers. This is an activity that teaches cooperation (or the results from non-cooperation) directly. Discussion following may be used for value clarification.

FIELD EXPERIENCES

Field trips to differentplaces of interest are becoming more common in public schools, yet our most valuable resource - each other - is rarely explored via field settings. Develop places for young children to visit and for people to exchange cultural information. A school exchange program, family exchange programs, and other cross-cultural experiences are becoming more important and should be extended to all schools as a part of their curriculum for individuality.

PARENT-CENTERED HOME LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Activities that can be designed with the home as an extension base for furthering cultural pluralism are most effective because they relate primary and secondary socializing institutions to a common goal. Home Learning Kits are most effective initiators of this concept. Such kits can be mutually developed by parents and teachers.

TRUST

Teachers and children, children and children must trust one another. One way to build trust and responsibility, while at the same time providing immediate feedback to the child in the classroom, is to provide for many opportunities for the child to evaluate himself, thus practicing honesty and responsibility. A welcome off-shoot of this type of activity is a lessening of teacher paper work.

INDIVIDUALIZATION

If individuals are important, then individuals, not classes, must be taught. Provision must be made for individual differences.

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Individualized instruction practice kits can be an effective tool for meeting the needs and talents of each child. Kits in specific areas of study like social studies, language arts, and other areas provide a variety of learning avenues for the child.

RELEVANCE THROUGH MUSIC

The use of music currently popular can make learning activities relevant to the young person in the classroom. Movies, slides, transparencies, and books can be correlated with music to provide a setting for social learnings and values clarification.

Summary. The use of a variety of activities and materials in the classroom generate enthusiasm for school, cooperation and communication among students, and provides more than one avenue for learning, thus enabling the teacher to meet individual needs and provide for individual differences. The first step toward improving the attitudes of children toward the culturally different is to make opportunity for culturally different children to know one another, to work together toward common goals. From the resulting knowledge about one another can grow understanding and acceptance. Activities and media which foster children's understanding and acceptance of those culturally different from themselves should be an integrated part of every school's curriculum.